

TAKE A STOCK 156 GTA AND ADD SOME
OF AUTODELTA'S MAGIC INGREDIENTS

Alfa Romeo 156 GTA AM

*Story by
Steve Berry
Photography by
Michael Ward*

BLACK VELVET





V E T

Alfa Romeo 156 GTA-AM

This is the story of three men and a car. It's a tale to warm the heart of every true Alfista, and that means all those who don't secretly long for a Ferrari with every fibre of their being.

Let us begin with Luciano Cappiello. After all, it is his car. A native of Sorrento he's now domiciled in Southport. Both seaside resorts begin with the letter 'S' but, I'd wager, have absolutely nothing else in common. Luciano has twin passions – apart from his very beautiful wife, of course – and they are food and cars. Food is his business and business is good. So when we met in his busy ristorante – always a good sign when every table's taken on a Tuesday – we drank, we ate and we talked, for hours, about cars.

Time to meet the second character in our story. Craig Aspin is a car salesman. He works at the Caledonia Alfa Romeo dealership in Preston (and was keen for me to point out his title is actually Brand Manager. Which I just did). Like Luciano, Craig is a passionate man – most car salesmen are. The crucial difference is that Craig isn't obsessed with the size of his desk, the proximity of his parking space to the front door or even his golf swing. He is that rare individual: a car salesman who actually likes cars.

Unveiled to a suitably impressed public at the Bologna Motorshow back in 2002, the 156 GTA AM promised 3.5 litres of ripsnortin' V6 and 300bhp through the front wheels. To get the power down it was equipped with whopping 19in alloy wheels and high-performance rubber fatter than one of the guests on an American daytime television show entitled *Help! I'm 350 pounds... and gaining!* The ever-so-deep front splitter gave it the look of a predatory shark and wouldn't have lasted five minutes on the pothole-strewn streets of Milan or Manchester but wasn't a problem in the air-conditioned halls of the Geneva Salon where it made its second appearance. For maximum impact it was painted in Batmobile black. Luciano Cappiello wanted one.

It was now down to Craig to try to secure a 156 GTA AM from what was rumoured to be a total production run of just 1000 cars. Perhaps. He tried Alfa here in the UK and got a non-committal answer. Undeterred, he took his enquiry to the Italians. Of course he then discovered that in Italy the non-committal answer is an art form.

A couple of months passed. Everyone got a bit older. Craig kept on talking to people who told him that the car would certainly, almost definitely in fact, be put into – strictly limited – production but wouldn't actually take an order or cash deposit for it. Most car salesmen would have given up by now; after all, it's only one car and one customer. But then, like I've already explained, Craig is no ordinary car salesman. He called Luciano: "I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is that Alfa Romeo isn't going to build the 156 GTA AM. The good news? I know a man who can."

And so do you, probably, because the man was Jano Djelalian, of Autodelta. Now that the factory race team is back under the Autodelta banner

this can cause some confusion. So let's just say that the Autodelta we're talking about here is the one which has been making Alfas stronger and faster and even better to look at for the past 20 years, from its premises in North London.

Over the next six months the car took shape. And what a shape. It was never just a question of Luciano writing a big cheque and collecting his car when they decided it was ready. And it was never about producing a replica Alfa show car. There was plenty of collaboration and consultation with ideas and drawings flying in both directions. For a start this one is quite a bit more powerful with the engine opened out to 3.7, rather than 3.5, litres. It has 330bhp. The last thing Jano wanted was to lose the outstanding features that made the factory 156 GTA such a great car; namely the immediate and flexible nature of the engine and the enormous poise of a chassis and suspension that manages to deliver an exciting and involving driving experience for the enthusiast – allied to a sumptuous level of comfort.

To find out if he'd succeeded we all made the trek to *Auto Italia's* test track. With Luciano sitting next to me exuding good humour I wasn't about to alter his mood with a clutch-frying tyre-shredding test of performance that Autodelta claims is five seconds 0-60mph and a top speed of 175mph. Also Luciano and Jano are both big fans of the Selespeed style of switching gear ratios. I'm not, at least not in a road car. I can see how it shaves tenths off lap times but for me it sacrifices too much of the engagement with the car. So it took me a couple of laps to get back into the groove of changing up and down the six-speed 'box PlayStation-style. A couple of laps and I was really starting to enjoy a car that, although not supercar fast, offers a level of performance considerably different from that offered by the factory.

While the character of a V6 engine that has seduced so many of us down the years is entirely intact – responsive, gutsy and sonorous – it is the sophistication of this car that leaves a lasting impression. If I told you what Jano had to say about the standard Brembo braking equipment that arrests the progress of the factory-spec GTA, then a lot of people at Alfa Romeo would be very upset. Mind you, he wouldn't be the first to point out that while a GTA has very little problem going, it's the stopping that's been less than marvellous. Jano's solution was to bin the Brembos and grip substantially bigger discs with six-pot calipers from those lovely and talented people at AP Racing. Too many times, though, I've driven cars with this level of enhanced performance that have ended up with the ride and handling characteristics of a frightened donkey. Not this one. Jano persuaded Luciano to forego the considerable visual impact of 19in alloys and go for 18s instead. As Jano explains, "The 18s offer better tyre choice, they preserve steering feedback and they're actually made to fit on an Alfa." And they look damn sexy, if you like that sort of thing. And I do. →

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In the movie *Ripley's Game*, John Malkovich plays Patricia Highsmith's antihero: an amoral aesthete. A man who surrounds himself with beautiful things. He drives a red Alfa 156 Sportwagon and the director expends a lot of screen time on showing the blood red car speeding across the exquisite Tuiscan. Can't imagine them doing that with a Mondeo can you? When a car looks as good as a 156 you'd be tempted to leave well alone. But where's the fun in that? For starters Autodelta grafted on Giugiaro's gorgeous facelifted front end to go with the worked-out wings that envelope almost indecently oversized alloys. Subtle details delight, such as the recessed indicators or the 'stepped' fuel-filler cap, and no doubt help Luciano justify the considerable cost of creating such a high-class bespoke motor.

When thinking (although 'thinking' is possibly pushing it) how they want their finished car to look, most owners of modified cars seem to consider the same criteria that Jordan would in selecting swimwear: something cheap and attention-grabbing in a pulsating fluorescent hue. Thankfully all involved in this project were aiming for a finished article that would look right parked on the pavement outside Selfridges rather than pulling handbrake turns in the car park next to the Bus Terminus.

When everyone was happy that everything fitted together beautifully the whole car was repainted. You might wonder why a brand-new black car would have to be resprayed, in black, and so did I. So I asked Jano but, as we really don't want to fall out with Alfa Romeo, I won't say what he said about the standard of the paint-job from the factory. All I would say is that it's quite a bit better than the early '80s when my GTV6 was finished off by dipping the stiff brush they used for sweeping the yard in Rosso Corsa. ↪

ABOVE: Styling changes are subtle and enhance the original design
RIGHT: Facelift 'Mk2' front end was grafted on to the donor 156 GTA

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

	Autodelta GTA AM 3.7	Alfa Romeo 156 GTA 3.2
Engine:	Transverse V6	Transverse V6
Capacity:	3750cc	3197cc
Bore/stroke:	101.0mm x 78.0mm	93.0mm x 78.0mm
Compression ratio:	10.5:1	10.5:1
Engine management:	Re-mapped Bosch Motronic ME7.3.1 electronic multi-point injection (speed-limiter removed). Ferrari throttle body	Bosch Motronic ME7.3.1 electronic multi-point injection
Max power:	328bhp @ 7300rpm	250bhp @ 6200rpm
Peak torque:	260lb ft @ 4700rpm	221lb ft @ 4800rpm
Gearbox:	6-speed Selespeed, limited-slip differential with 30% progressive lock	6-speed Selespeed
Brakes:	<i>Front</i> 355mm ventilated discs with AP Racing 6 pot calipers. <i>Rear</i> 276mm discs	<i>Front</i> 330mm ventilated discs with Brembo 4 pot calipers. <i>Rear</i> 276mm discs
Wheels:	8.5J x 18in	7.5J x 17in
Tyres:	235/40/18	225/45/17
Weight:	1460kg	1460kg
0-60mph:	5.2sec	6.3sec
Top speed:	175mph	155mph
Price:	£39,234	£29,560

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One of the most annoying things about the new breed of in-er-face chavtastic (ask your kids) motors is that they look the part and make a ludicrous racket that indicates prodigious performance but fail to deliver. All mouth and trousers as my mother would say. No danger of that here, of course, with 3.7 litres of lovingly enlarged V6 fed by a modified fuel injection system (utilising parts more commonly found on the cars that come out of Maranello) and transmitted to the driven wheels by a speeded-up six-speed clutchless shift and a limited-slip differential.

But it's the way the car works that is most impressive. It feels like it was always this way. As though the six months it spent in the Autodelta workshop never happened. It feels like a factory car, and I do mean that as praise, in case you were wondering. Which is good because it's not a rich man's plaything, it's an everyday car. With Luciano at the wheel it'll turn 1000 miles a month. Which is why he wanted a car that cossets. Hence the exhaust system designed to provide a mellow bellow rather than a the scream of a flat-out charge up a racetrack straight. It's also why the springs in the adjustable coil-over dampers were switched the day before we took to the track. Both Jano and Luciano were keen that the car should have the potential to shame over-cautious

ABOVE: Much time and effort went into blending in the fuel-filler cover
BELOW: Super-smooth paint job contributes to the top quality conversion

supercar owners on track days. And it does: but there was simply no way that Luciano was going to drive something that dislocated a kidney every time he hit a speed bump.

Of course it wasn't cheap: Luciano was looking at writing the same sort of cheque for Autodelta's efforts as he was when he bought the car brand new. Yes, this is a sixty grand 156. And if you want one, or perhaps even the 400bhp supercharger-equipped car that Autodelta is in the process of developing, then I'm sure Jano would be happy to oblige. 



CONTACTS

Luciano Cappiello
 Trattoria-Pizzeria 'Sorrento'
 Southport. Tel 01942 218555

Craig Aspin
 Caledonia Alfa Romeo
 Preston. Tel 01772 555800

Jano Djelalian
 Autodelta
 London NW10. Tel 0208 838 3535